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March 27, 2009 in [missives from academia](#) by [The China Beat](#) | [No comments](#)

From Kate Edgerton-Tarpley (3/27/09, 4:03 p.m.):

Attending Panel 44, "Visualizing Order: Images and the Construction of Legal Culture in Ming and Qing China" inspired me to continue Paul Katz's discussion of religion — as well as law and ritual — for a moment. Both Katz's paper on representations of underworld justice in late imperial China and Yanhong Wu's paper on legal order in Ming case stories and illustrations provided fascinating examples of ghosts, spirits, birds, and leaves entering courtrooms to either exonerate an innocent person or condemn a guilty one. Katz argued that Underworld justice was seen as less corrupt than the law system for the living, so women and others who had trouble getting justice often turned to it. The discussant, Edward Farmer, then made the point that there was a need for this alternative justice system because imposing and upholding hierarchy, rather than bringing about justice, was the main concern of the official legal system. I thought, however, that some of the examples offered in the papers, both Yanhong's and Thomas Buoye's, did show a real concern with justice in the official courts. Perhaps the degree of concern for justice in official courts could be a topic for future discussion.

Panel 44, as well as comments made by Keith Knapp during his presentation on "Magistrates and Miracles" in panel 118 on "The Mandate of Heaven at the Local Level in Imperial China," both highlighted the need to acknowledge how real, important, and powerful the religious aspects of Confucianism (not to mention Daoism and Buddhism) were for official as well as everyday life in imperial China. These panels demonstrated a fascinating degree of interplay or, as Katz termed it – a continuum between official duties and religious duties, between official courts and underworld courts, between human plaintiffs and ghost/spirit plaintiffs, between the human and the supernatural.

In the Great Leap Famine panel tomorrow morning (#139), I plan to touch upon the impact — in terms of official responses to famine — that the loss of the Mandate of Heaven idea and religious constructions of famine and drought had in 1959-61.